

Greenbelt Recreation ARTS

Artful Afternoon Workshop: Paper Quilts

Inspiration: In honor of Black History Month, this activity draws inspiration from the bold compositions of African American quilters. Specifically, we are looking at the work of a celebrated, intergenerational group of artists from Boykin, Alabama. This area is also known — problematically — as “Gee’s Bend” after a former plantation on the site owned by Joseph Gee. The artistry of the quilters has flourished from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day. Their community is surrounded on three sides by the Alabama River; this relative geographic isolation, compounded by the termination of ferry service during the Civil Rights movement, is believed to have contributed to an unusually high degree of cultural continuity in their way of life. As many as four generations of quilters have been active in several families. The artists are now famous for their lively, improvisational “my way” quilts and “housetop” patterns, among other designs.



Mary Lee Bendolph. *Blocks, Strips, Strings, And Half Squares*, 84” x 81”, cotton, 2005.



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Learn more about the artists

[Gee’s Bend Quiltmakers](#), unattributed article, Souls Grown Deep; includes individual artist profiles

[Fabric of Their Lives](#), article by Amei Wallach for Smithsonian Magazine; discusses the local way of life and the start of the artists’ exhibition history

[While I Yet Live](#), “Op-Doc” video by Maris Curran for the New York Times (14 mins.)

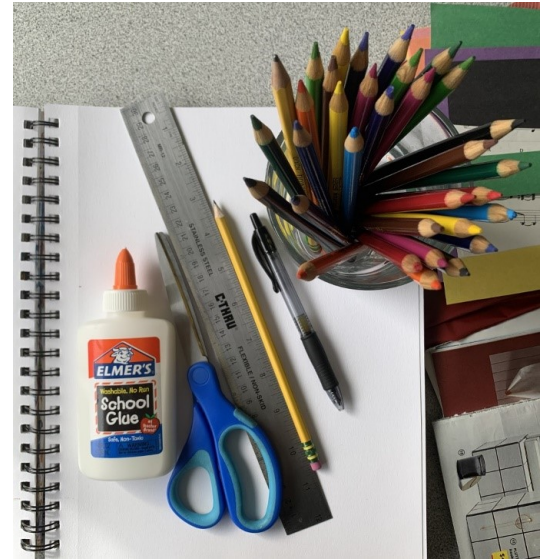
At left: Loretta Pettway Bennett. *Strips*, 96” X 76”, cotton and denim, 2005.

Activity: The Gee's Bend quilters sometimes use design motifs based on shapes and patterns that they observe in their surroundings. These may include fences, porches, roads and sheds, for example. Let's make our own paper quilts inspired by what we see around us! When you're done, consider framing your artwork.

1. ASSEMBLE YOUR MATERIALS. You will need:

- a pencil
- a ruler
- white paper for sketching and patterns*
- scissors
- newspaper or other material to protect your work surface
- papers with different colors and patterns to make your design*
- glue or gluestick*
- optional: magazines, wrapping paper, scrap book paper or photos to incorporate into your design
- optional: oil pastels, magic markers, or paint markers

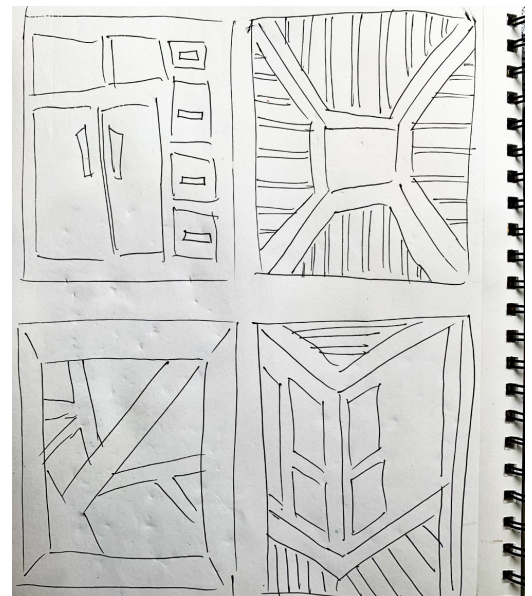
**If you signed up to receive a materials kit for this activity, these items will be included!*



2. OBSERVE. Look around your home and neighborhood. What kinds of geometric shapes do you see? Do you see any shapes or lines in repeating patterns? Sketch them on white paper, or take a few pictures for reference. Focus primarily on the outline of each shape, with few or no details inside the outline. In your final design, it might be clear what you were observing, or you might create some secret symbols that only you will recognize!

Look at the shapes that you found. How can they be combined? Choose one or more of your shapes, and imagine how they could be repeated to make a pattern.

At right: sketches by Barbara Joann Combs based on: cabinets, a basket, a tree and buildings.





Pattern based on a refrigerator
Example by Barbara Joann Combs

3. PLAN YOUR DESIGN.

Decide what size your paper quilt will be. It can be the size of a full sheet of paper, or smaller. If it is smaller, what will the proportions be? Will it be taller than it is wide? It's up to you! Choose a piece of paper to use as the foundation for your design; cut it to your desired size and shape if necessary.

Take a piece of white paper that is at least as big as your paper quilt will be. If it is bigger, cut the white paper down to be the size of your quilt. Draw out your design. Decide which papers you will use to make the different shapes in your pattern. Write down your choices on the drawing to remind you.

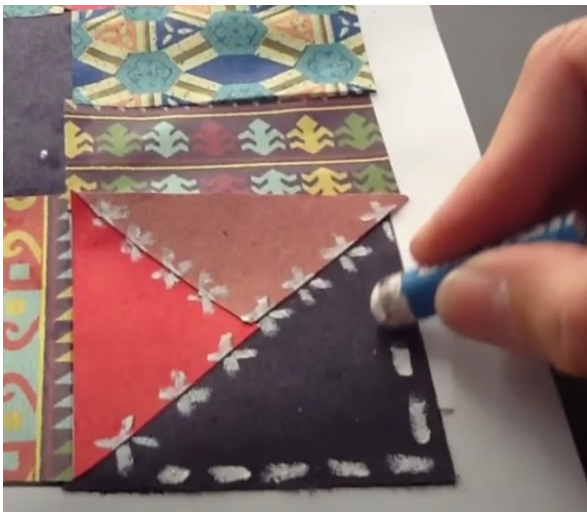
4. CUT OUT YOUR QUILT PIECES.

The goal now is to recreate the design that you drew with shapes cut out of your chosen papers. You can either keep the drawing in tact and redraw the shapes on your quilt papers, or you can cut the shapes out of the white pattern and trace them onto the quilt papers.

Cut out ALL the pieces before you start assembling your quilt, so that you can lay out the whole design and put every piece just where you want it!



Pattern based on a flower pot
Example by Barbara Joann Combs



Adding "stitches" to the composition
From a [video by Mrs. Alejos](#)

6. ADD EMBELLISHMENTS (optional). Using oil pastels, magic markers, pens, paint markers or other media, you can draw additional details onto your paper quilt. One approach is to draw "stitches" along all the edges; you might want to draw straight stitches (a line of small dashes) or "X"s with the centers along the edge where two different papers meet. You can also use these drawing tools to add additional designs, or even words! If you like, you can cut out letters or words from magazines and add them to your quilt. You're the artist, and you get to decide!

The official theme of Black History Month, 2021 is "The Black Family: Representation, Identity and Diversity". This theme was selected by the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. At your option, you can design a paper quilt that expresses your identity or reflects your own family history. If several members of your family each make a paper quilt, they can be framed together as a larger art piece!

Deep Roots and Contemporary Expression: Quilting in African American Art History

African Americans have been making quilts since the time of enslavement. Over centuries, a craft learned in bondage has been passed on and transformed into a medium of immense expressive power. African American artists have been innovators and exemplars in many styles of quilting, including both abstract and pictorial work. As versatile as painting or any other artistic medium, quilts have been used to convey purely visual ideas, symbolic meanings, and stories of all kinds. Quilts have been produced both by individual artists working alone, and by communities of quilters working together. Originally practiced predominantly by women, participation has expanded to include an increasing number of male artists. Enjoy the links below, offering a few glimpses into the history and contemporary practices of accomplished, African American quiltmakers.



Bible Quilt by Harriet Powers, 1886.
Collection of the Smithsonian Institution.
Powers is sometimes described as the
Mother of African American quiltmaking.



An example of 19th century
kente cloth from the
Smithsonian Institution. Some
scholars believe that African
American quilt designs may
have been informed by kente
and other west African textile
traditions.

VIDEOS



Exhibition: [“A Century of African-American Quilts”](#) at the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum in Colonial Williamsburg, 2017 (3 mins.)



Exhibition: African American Heritage Museum of Southern New Jersey, [“With These Hands”](#), an exhibit of 101 African American Quilts, 2012 (50 mins.)



For children: a reading of the picture book [“Sewing Stories: Harriet Powers' Journey from Slave to Artist”](#) by Barbara Herkert (11 mins.)



Artist profile: [Marion Coleman](#) (d. 2019).
Fellow, National Endowment for the Arts.
Video by the Alliance for California
Traditional Arts, 2018 (5 mins.)



Artist profile: Stephen Towns (living
Maryland artist), [“A Closer Look”](#) with the
Baltimore Museum of Art, 2019 (5 mins.)



Artist profile: Michael A. Cummings (living
artist), excerpt from the [Craft in America](#)
“QUILTS” episode, 2019 (11 mins.)